

ANNUAL REPORT
Office of the Student Ombudsperson
The University of Chicago

Alexis Howard & Saeed Richardson, AY 2016-17

The Office of the Student Ombudsperson was established in 1968 to provide students with a neutral, independent, peer-provided source of information and help in navigating the University. While the office continues exploring ways to improve the service it provides, the primary aim of the Office remains constant: first, to provide students with information they have difficulty accessing themselves, and second, to facilitate the resolution of student concerns involving faculty, administrators, or—less commonly—other students.

In 2016-2017, the Office of the Student Ombudsperson undertook new procedures for tracking student inquiries and managing caseloads, resulting in clearer insights about both trends in student complaints and the performance of the office. In total, the office received 67 inquiries, of which 19 came from undergraduates, 22 from doctoral students, and 9 from professional students. The rest of the inquiries came from master's degree students, postdoctoral fellows, and outside entities. Of the doctoral students, 9 came from the Humanities Division or the Divinity School, 6 from the Social Sciences Division, and 7 from either the Biological or Physical Sciences Division.

Students came to the office with a wide array of issues, though academic problems were the most common, with more than a third of cases concerning grading procedures, grade appeals, course bidding procedures, and graduation requirements. As such, the office encourages faculty to remain as clear as possible with their evaluation procedures and performance expectations. The office also recommends that departments and/or divisions implement formal grade appeal procedures when and where possible.

In a similar vein, a number of doctoral students came to the office looking for help resolving interpersonal disputes among members of their dissertation committees. These problems are particularly challenging to address, and can result in significant strain to students. As such, the office strongly recommends that in the interest of supporting student progress in the advanced stages of their studies, each department or division considers the implementation of resources for committee management for their students.

There were also several cases concerning harassment and/or discrimination. In some cases, students contacted the office in order to explore their options in filing a complaint or seeking other recourse. In other cases, inquiries were from students who had been accused of misconduct and were seeking information about the investigative stages. As such, the office encourages the university to continue their efforts in publicizing the roles of the Title IX office and other relevant entities. We also encourage continued transparency about the

investigative process on behalf of both the complainant and the respondent. In addition to serving as resource for students looking for information on discrimination and harassment, the Student Ombudsperson also participated as an *ex officio* member of the Panel on Unlawful Harassment throughout the school year.

In sum, the new procedures implemented for case management in the 2016-17 academic year were successful. They facilitated communication between the Ombudsperson and the Associate, and allowed for better insight into trends in student complaints and resolutions while maintaining rigorous standards of confidentiality and neutrality. As such, these procedures will be continued in the 2017-18 academic year and used to develop training materials and other resources for the Office of the Student Ombudsperson.